

What does Lao in Chinese Mean: A Cognitive Semantic Analysis

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Abstract: Cognitive semantics posits that the acquisition of multiple senses for a single word is predicated upon its basic meaning, with meaning extension occurring through the mechanisms of radiation and concatenation. This essay centers on an exploration of the diverse meanings associated with the Chinese character Lao. Drawing upon the linguistic data and analyzing relevant examples provided by the Center for Chinese Linguistics Peking University (CCL), the research reveals that metaphor, metonymy, and image schema are the major cognitive mechanisms, which play a significant role in its process of the meaning extension. Furthermore, the investigation into Lao offers valuable insights for both vocabulary instruction and intercultural studies.

Keywords: Lao; Polysemy; Metaphor; Metonymy; Image Schema

1. Introduction

Chinese characters is one of the representatives of long-standing and prosperous Chinese culture. It serves as the testimony for over five thousand years of uninterrupted Chinese civilization, which sets the foundation for the diversity of meanings in Chinese language. Taylor defines Polysemy as “the coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase”^[1]. Through the relative thorough examination of the meanings of a particular word, we can master this word comprehensively, which facilitates the foreign language acquisition.

In recent years, the analysis of polysemous Chinese characters from a cognitive linguistic perspective has garnered significant attention both domestically and internationally. In China, scholars such as Liu and Zhang (2020) have focused on the semantic networks of specific polysemous characters, exploring how cultural context influences meaning extension^[2]. Research has also delved into the cognitive mechanisms underlying these extensions, with studies highlighting the role of metaphor and metonymy in shaping polysemy (Chen, 2021)^[3]. Internationally, scholars like Evans and Green (2018) have contributed to the understanding of polysemy in Chinese within broader cognitive frameworks, comparing it with similar phenomena in other languages^[4]. Additionally, research by Li and Wang (2019) has examined the interaction between language and cognition, emphasizing how cognitive processes inform the polysemous nature of Chinese characters^[5]. This growing body of literature underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, integrating linguistic analysis with cognitive science to better understand the complexities of meaning in Chinese language.

Despite extensive researches on the mechanisms of polysemous characters, little attention has been paid to the cognitive analysis of specific Chinese characters. Major studies have shed light on function words^{[6][7][8][9]}. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding Lao, which this essay tries to discuss. Along with Introduction section, seven sections constitute this essay. Section 2 sets the theoretical foundation for the following analysis; Section 3 reviews the formation and the usage of Lao from the historical perspective; Section 4 exhibits various senses in accordance with CCL, an authorized Chinese language corpus, and the antonyms of Lao; Section 5 delves into the cognitive analysis with the approaches of previous mentioned theories; and Section 6 discusses profound significance that the survey of Lao exerts. The last part serving as the conclusion presents the summary of this research, conclusions it has reached, concerned limitations, as well as some suggested further studies.

2. Theoretical Background

Cognitive semantics posits that meaning is not merely a static property of words but is dynamically

constructed through mental processes and embodied experiences. According to Langacker (1999), meaning is grounded in human cognition and is influenced by the context in which language is used^[10]. This perspective contrasts with traditional views that treat meaning as a fixed relationship between words and their referents. In this essay, the cognitive semantic analysis of Chinese character Lao is on the basis of four particular theories, i.e., Prototype Theory, Conceptual Metaphor, Conceptual Metonymy, and Image Schema.

Prototype Theory, introduced by Rosch (1973), complements cognitive semantics by explaining how categories are formed and understood. Instead of viewing categories as rigid definitions, Prototype Theory suggests that categories are organized around central examples or "prototypes". For instance, the category "bird" may center around a prototype like a sparrow, with other birds (e.g., ostriches, penguins) being more peripheral^[11].

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is pivotal in cognitive semantics. It argues that metaphors are fundamental to human thought and language. For example, the metaphor "TIME IS MONEY" influences how we perceive and discuss time, framing it in terms of economic value^[12]. Studies such as those by Kövecses (2002) further explore how metaphors structure our understanding of various domains, showing the pervasive influence of metaphorical thinking on word meaning^[13].





Conceptual Metonymy Theory further enriches the cognitive semantic approach by focusing on how one entity can stand in for another based on contextual relationships. According to Lakoff (1993), metonymy operates through contiguity rather than similarity, allowing for a more diverse understanding of meaning^[14]. For example, using "the White House" to refer to the U.S. President exemplifies how metonymy relies on a close association between the two concepts.

Image Schema Theory, proposed by Johnson (1987), emphasizes the role of bodily experiences in shaping our understanding of abstract concepts. Image schemas are recurring patterns of sensory and perceptual experiences that form the basis for meaning construction. For example, the "container" schema helps us understand various concepts related to boundaries and inclusion. When we say someone "is in trouble," we invoke the container schema, conceptualizing trouble as an enclosing space^[15].

The theories introduced above will be served to the following analysis of various senses of Lao and the process of meaning extension.

3. Historical Evolution and Usage

Table 1: Pictographs of Lao in three major evolutionary periods

LAO				
	Jiaguwen (Oracle Bone Inscriptions)	Jinwen (Bronze Inscriptions)	Xiaozhuan (Small Seal Script)	Shadow Graph

As is shown in Table 1, the Chinese character Lao can be categorized as a pictograph. Generally, it looks like an elderly walking with the hunchback and a stick. The table above exhibits the development of Lao from Oracle Bone Inscriptions, Bronze Inscriptions, to Small Seal Script, with a shadow graph of an elderly attached at last. Since the shape of Lao in other historical periods did not reveal significant changes, only three representative figures are used to illustrate. It suggests that Lao in Oracle Bone Inscriptions emphasizes the shape of the head and the walking stick, while in *Bronze Inscriptions*, the hair. When it evolved to the stage of Small Seal Script, most pictographic features of Lao disappeared, and Lao became more similar to the shape of contemporary Chinese character. Of particular note is that the shape of BI was more and more visualized during this process. According to Zhang (2011), BI represents the shape people making a bow, and thus, BI, as a part of Lao, shows that people should pay respect to those who are elder^[16]. This is where the Chinese tradition of valuing the old people reflects.

Generally, it is always required that the interpretation of polysemy should be based on the combination of diachronic and synchronic methods, and it is unrealistic to study polysemy without ever referring to the origin of a lexical item^[17]. *Center for Chinese Linguistics Peking University* (CCL) has established a relatively well-developed corpus system, whereby facilitating the research of semantic

meanings of Lao^[18]. Based on the retrieval, the summary is as follows.

From the diachronic perspective, we can find that Lao, generally speaking, was used as a prefix. This usage first appeared during the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Examples in case are “old soldier”(In English) and so on. During Tang and Song Dynasties, there was a trend that the grammatical function of Lao evolved totally from notional words to prefixes, while Lao as a prefix had further developed, referring to animals and other natural creatures, like “tiger”. It is worth noting that during Ming and Qing Dynasties, the usage as a prefix of Lao was rather active, reaching its historical peak, like “sly fox”.

From the synchronic perspective, the senses of Lao have tremendously expanded. Using the texts from various medium such as literary works, news reports, editorials taken from the early 2000s to now as a database, Lao can be used when 1) describing someone is old, mature or experienced; 2) referring to someone respectfully; 3) used as adverbs of frequency; 4) used as euphemism; 5) referring to Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism. Since this essay chiefly focuses on the semantic meanings of Lao in contemporary context, the author tries to present a deeper analysis on the senses listed above.

4. The Meanings of Lao

The polysemous quality of Chinese characters constructs the diversity of Chinese language. The meaning of Lao differs when it is used to cater to diverse contexts in contemporary communication. One of the most objective and effective methods for ascertaining the meaning of a word is to consult its usage under the circumstances of authentic contexts. Based on the linguistic corpora provided by CCL, we use Lao as the key search term across five grammatical categories. Following meticulous manual screening to eliminate irrelevant entries, we obtained the following results: 278,861 verb instances, 2,230,883 adjective instances, 418,292 verb instances, 920,241 noun instances, and 0 conjunction instances. In total, our analysis yielded 3,848,277 valid linguistic entries for further examination(as shown in Figure 1).

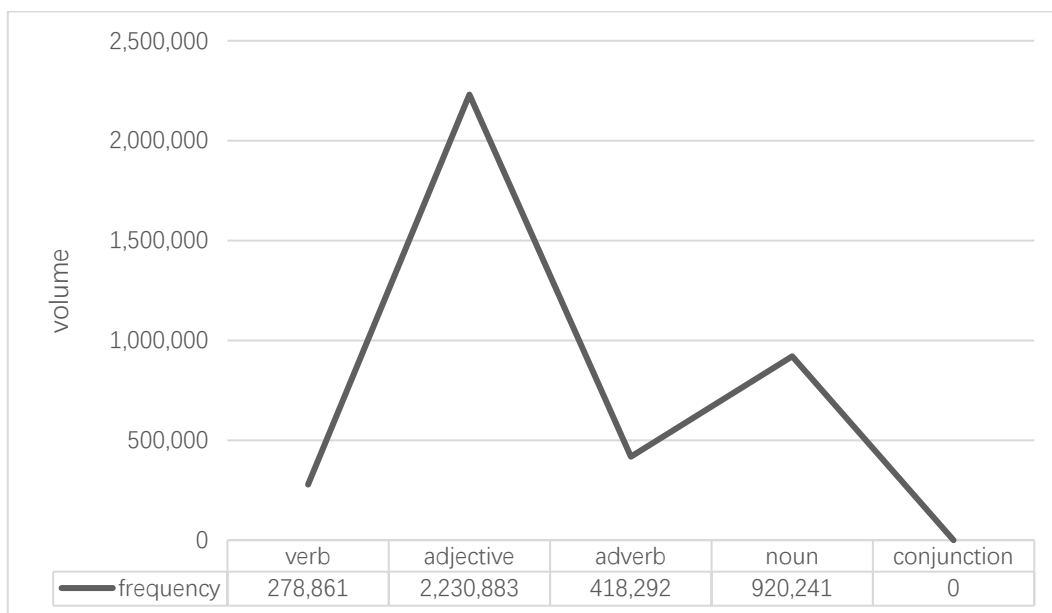


Figure 1: Frequencies of Lao retrieved by parts of speech

From the statistics above, we can find that Lao is most frequently appeared as an adjective, while there reveals no usage of Lao as a conjunction.

4.1 Visual Perception and Lao

Psychologically, Visual Perception Theory discusses the input of visual information via the optic nerve and associated activation of other brain structures and circuits that produce behaviors in response to perceived images^[19]. It goes beyond mere seeing and involves the cognitive processes that organize and interpret the visual stimuli to form meaningful perceptions. When you encounter an old man among a group of young children, it is quite easy for us to distinguish him from these children, since we know what characteristics an old man should have – probably a hunchback, slow walking, wrinkled face, etc. When you go to your balcony and find that the flower in your pot has withered, you may not water it

later because you know that “the flower is dead” from its appearance. When you are cooking in the kitchen, you may not pay attention to the pot for a while, so that the dish burns. You might throw the burned food away because you know it does not taste good. The visual system plays a role in processing and interpreting visual information, taking into account factors such as attention, memory, and prior knowledge. The circumstances above are based on our past experiences attained from daily life, and it is these very experiences that influence our decision and shape our cognition.

4.2 Lao and its Antonyms

Lao is such a frequently-used word in Chinese language context that should not contain merely one sense. It represents a notable and consistent pattern in our daily engagement with the world, perception, and social exchanges. When we say someone is Lao (old), we mean he/she should be in his or her 60s, 70s or even more (This expression can also be used as a form of euphemism which means someone passed away). But if we say someone is “not old”, we may mean someone is young, adult, or even looks as if they were children. When we say a certain piece of clothing is Lao (outdated), we mean this garment no longer follows the up-trending style and we are not about to keep it. When we say some kind of vegetable, such as cucumber, is Lao (withered), we mean this plant experienced so long time unpicked and it is inedible. But if we say this cucumber is “*not old*”, it may be green and tender in appearance or it has not been ripe and we should not pick it to eat.

The cases above are used to illustrate some shared senses of Lao such as old, experienced, outdated, withered. When a negative prefix “not” has been added before Lao, new senses are created and thus we have some antonyms of Lao. If we say someone is not old, it might be uncertain about how he/she really is since this person can be young, adult, or still retains childlike innocence. But if we say someone is not young, we usually mean he/she is aged. Antonyms play an important role in helping us understand word polysemy.

5. Cognitive Analysis of Lao

5.1 Prototype Theory and Lao

Traditional category perceives that a category is defined by a set of characteristics of sufficient and necessary conditions that are common to all members of this domain. Based on the concept of *Family Resemblance* (Wittgenstein, 1978), American psychologist Eleanor Rosch (1973) conducted numbers of experiments and investigations and put forward the theory of prototypes and basic-level structures^[20]. The core meaning of a word derives from the abstraction of the common characteristics of all members of the category. The closer a word is to the core meaning, i.e., it has significant archetypal characteristics, the more it can be considered a typical member; conversely, it can be called an atypical or marginal member.

Cognitive semantics, based on Prototype Theory, believes that we should regard the background information related to the lexical meaning of a word as a network system. We can only understand the meanings of a word by placing it in this system. Time and space are two basic cognitive domains^[20]. Metaphoric mappings from Time Domain to various domains can be found when we analyze the semantic meanings of Lao. Under Time Domain, when someone has experienced 60, 70 years or even more, this person can be regarded as Lao (old). Under Experience Domain, when someone has been in a technical field for decades and is quite familiar with one certain activity, this person can be regarded as “being experienced and skillful”. Under Sense Domain, when we cooked something overtime, especially frying and boiling, this dish can be regarded as “being overcooked”. Under Degree Domain, when a color, red for example, is beyond its basic color spectrum, this red is described as “crimson or dark red”.

The meanings of most linguistic symbols are not established under merely single domain. There are two main ways of development in the process of word polysemy, i.e., Radiation and Concatenation.

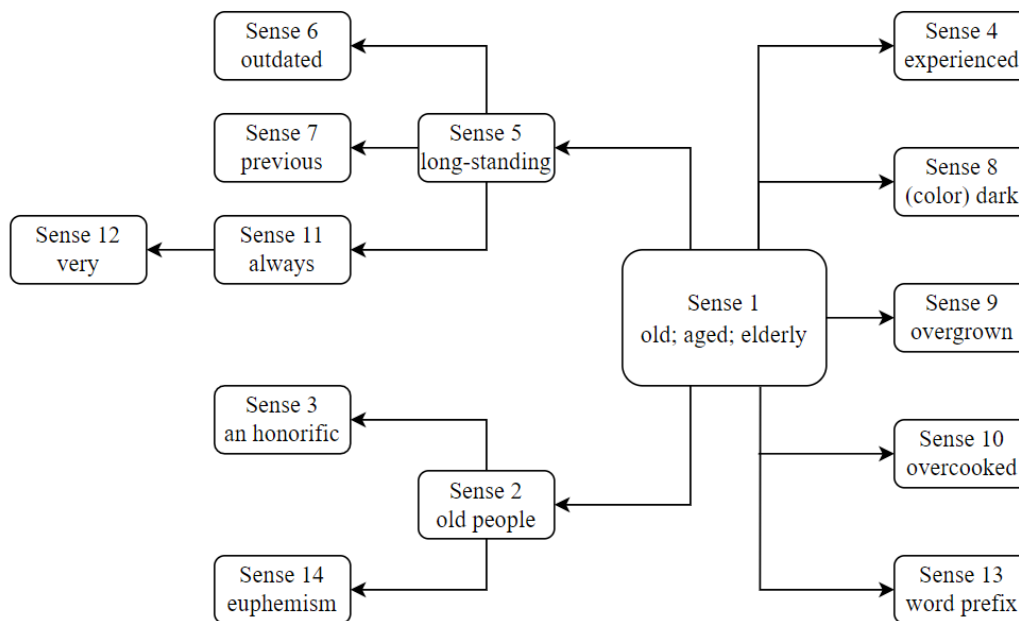


Figure 2: The process of meaning extension on the basis of the original meaning

In Figure 2, various senses of Lao, with references in CCL, are listed under one lexical entry. The fourteen surveyed senses are reorganized in the above Figure to show the mechanism of polysemy. The basic word meaning, Sense 1 (old; aged; elderly), is in the center, while other meanings, Senses 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, are gradually generated around it and has an inevitably direct connection with the basic meaning and finally formed the semantic Radiation category. Sense 2 (old people) is derived from the basic meaning, and Sense 3 (an honorific for the elderly) and Sense 14 (euphemism) are both rooted under the foundation of the meaning “old people”. Similarly, it is also clear that other senses (Senses 6, 7, and 11) are based on Sense 5. This form of meaning acquiring is Concatenation. Radiation and Concatenation both constitute a comprehensive hierarchy of the whole polysemous category. According to Prototype Theory, Radiation reflects the centripetal character of the lexical category; while Concatenation reflects the openness.

5.2 Metonymic Analysis of Lao

Metonymy is a cognitive process and linguistic strategy where a word or phrase is used to refer to something else that is closely related to it, but not explicitly named. This relationship is based on contiguity or association within a cognitive framework^[21]. Metonymy is comparatively not quite frequently occurred in the process of word polysemy of Lao. The basic meaning (Sense 1), “old, aged, and elderly”, is grammatically in adjective form, while its one of the extended meanings (Sense 2), “those who are old, aged, and elderly”, in noun form. The euphemistic meaning (Sense 14) is further extended when we would like to address “those who are old, aged, and elderly” passed away. This expression is only used colloquially and must be followed by the suffix “already”. Similar metonymic meaning extensions can be found in Senses 6 & 7 based on Sense 5, “long-standing”.

5.3 Metaphoric Analysis of Lao

5.3.1 Metaphoric Mappings of Lao

Apart from Metonymy, Metaphor is another effective way for a particular word to extend its meaning. “Metaphorical expression” refers to a linguistic expression that is the surface realization of a cross-domain mapping from a source domain onto a target domain^[12]. Cognitive linguistics holds that mind and cognition are closely related to the concrete body, and bodily experiences are gained during our everyday interaction with the material world. Due to the passage of time, we gradually age, accompanied by various physiological changes that are correlated with this progression. On the one hand, there is the external manifestation of aging, such as wrinkles, hunchback, and a slower gait; on the other hand, there is internal decline, including decreased memory and slower reflexes. This bodily experience is where the

following metaphoric mappings reflect(as shown in Table 2).

Table2: Metaphoric mappings of Lao in diverse domains

DOMAINS	MAPPINGS		EXAMPLES	
LAO as Sentiments	a long period of time	→	people's longing for love	<i>dilaotianhuang ; baitouxielao</i>
		→	interdependece / hatred	<i>laoxiangjianlaoxiang ; laosibuxiangwanglai</i>
LAO as Mentality	sophisticated; experienced	→	reliability	<i>laojiangchuma ; laochengchizhong</i>
		→	cunning	<i>laojianjuhua ; laomoushuan</i>
LAO as Social Status	long-standing	→	social status	<i>yanlao ; laojianghu</i>
LAO as Responsibility	those who are elderly	→	responsibility & obligation	<i>laoniushidu ; laodangyizhuang</i>

5.3.2 Death Metaphor in Lao

Death is an ever-existing phenomenon both naturally and socially. The topic of Life and Death has also been discussed throughout human civilization. As Shakespeare famously writes, “To be or not to be, that is the question” (*Hamlet*, SCENE III). According to Li (2009), death “has a deep cultural connotation, which contains and indicates the system construction, life experience, object cognition, value orientation, religious interpretation and folk customs of the Chinese people since ancient times, and is a kind of linguistic treasure that needs systematic and in-depth study”^[22]. In Chinese culture, Lao is quite closely related to death, and thus it is worth exploring the meanings contained in Lao. Following the author tries to present various death metaphors shared both in English and Chinese languages, and certain metaphors unique to the Chinese language.

1) DEATH IS DEPARTURE: it stems from the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS JOURNEY^[23]. There are expressions in English such as to pass away, to leave, to depart from the world forever, etc., with Chinese equivalents such as “Yellow spring road” and so on.

2) DEATH IS REST. There are expressions in English such as to go to rest in peace, to be asleep forever, etc., with Chinese equivalents such as “long sleeping” and *so on*.

3) DEATH IS END. There are expressions in English such as to end, to expire, to be done, etc., with Chinese equivalents such as “close the life” and *so on*.

4) DEATH IS ENTRY TO ANOTHER WORLD. There are expressions in English such as to be with God, to go to a better world, to cross the Great Divide, etc., with Chinese equivalents such as “meet the King Yan” and so on.

The above metaphors show similarities expressing death both in English and Chinese contexts. Nevertheless, due to factors like customs and geography, Chinese language contains some particular metaphors relating to death – HUMAN DEATH IS DEATH OF PLANTS and EMPERORS DEATH IS NATURAL DISASTERS. Death expressions such as “wither” “collapse” and so on are frequently used by Chinese people.

5.4 Image-schematic Analysis of Lao

Image schemas are recurrent dynamic patterns inherent in our perception and interactions with external world, providing structure and continuity to our bodily experience. The high level of generalization and abstraction inherent in image schemas grants them remarkable flexibility. Consequently, we can utilize image schemas to construct our multifaceted bodily experiences, endowing our experiences with graspable and manipulable structures.

Various patterns constitute image schemas: in everyday bodily experience, CONTAINERS, PATHS, LINKS, FORCE, BALANCE; and in various orientations and relations, UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK, PART-WHOLE, CENTER-PERIPHERY, etc. Three patterns function when the meaning extension of Lao is analyzed, i.e. PATH schema, CONTAINER schema, and UP-DOWN schema.

5.4.1 PATH Schema for Time and Event

Each of our movements seems to follow a certain path: we begin from a starting point and eventually reach an end point. As we move towards our destination, we pass through a series of stops along the way, and we can even change our route as long as the general direction remains the same. PATH schema is thus abstracted from these daily experiences, where five elements are involved, i.e. starting point, end point, path, and direction.

Take Sense 4 of Lao for instance. You may start practicing some skill from scratch, which is your starting point, and aiming to acquire it to fully grasp you would encounter numerous obstacles. These difficulties can be regarded as the stops along the way. After unremitting efforts, you eventually acquire this skill and reach your end point. Under that circumstance, you can be called as an experienced and skillful one. More examples can be found in the meaning extensions of Lao in Sense 5 (long-standing), and Sense 14 (to pass away).

Particularly, the euphemistic expression of Lao reflected in Sense 14 involves the metaphor DEATH IS END OF JOURNEY. Life can be regarded as a figurative path with a final destination, which is death. The metaphoric mappings can be illustrated in the following way (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3: Metaphoric mappings of Life

SOURCE DOMAIN		TARGET DOMAIN
journey	→	life
traveler	→	person
starting point	→	birth
initial condition	→	talent
luggage	→	personal problem
obstacles	→	external difficulties
distance	→	duration
traveled distance	→	achieved accomplishments
destination	→	life goal
end point	→	death

5.4.2 CONTAINER Schema for Frequency and Degree

Containers exist everywhere in our daily life. Our existence in the world as separate individuals determines that we have countless daily experiences of being restricted by containers, or, as containers restricting other objects. When we come into this world as living beings, we exist in the forms of embryos in the mother's womb and gradually develop and grow. Before birth, we are confined to this tangible container; and after birth, we play different roles and are still restricted by different forms of containers. As part of a family, we are under the framework of the family; we go to school and we have to stay in the classroom at a given time; and in society, we need to abide by different rules, regulations and laws, and thus our behaviors are limited by these invisible containers. From these bodily experiences, we can abstract a recurring structure which is CONTAINER schema.

According to Johnson (1987: 22), the container as landmark usually protects the trajectory from some external force; vice versa, the trajectory is also subject to the limitations and constraints from the container itself^[15]. In view of this relationship, the position of the trajectory in the container is relatively fixed. Following examples are used to illustrate Sense 7 of Lao (previous): “usual place”, “frequent illness”, and so on. Lao in “usual place” can be understood as a temporal container that includes the past history and experiences of the place. When we say “usual place”, we imply that the place carries the memories and emotions of the past, just as a container carries its contents. This container becomes fuller over time, i.e. it is filled with more memories and stories. In “frequent illness”, Lao can be seen as a container for an ongoing problem or situation. This container becomes more entrenched over time. When we say that someone has “frequent illness”, we mean that the problem has existed for a long time and may be difficult to resolve.

When our daily actions and behaviors are recurrent, we can metaphorically say that we exert these actions under the constraint of a certain container, from which Lao acquires its Sense 11 (always; forever; keep on) and Sense 12 (very). In these senses Lao functions as an adverb grammatically, as are in following examples: “the heading is always falling”, and “the face of the old brother”. Lao in the first example indicates that an action is repeated over and over again, or that a state of affairs has continued unchanged. While in “the face of the old brother”, Lao means very, and modifies a limited number of monosyllabic adjectives. This sense is based on past feelings that someone has towards a particular object or certain traits that something contains.

5.4.3 UP-DOWN Schema for Hierarchy and Respect

In ancient societies, the social status of tribal members depended largely on their physical robustness and strength, and these traits were in turn largely related to an individual's height. As a result, taller hunters tended to have a more favorable status compared to shorter hunters. While in modern societies, social status and the amount of power are closely related: the higher/lower the status, the more/less power.

In view of this circumstance, the cognitive of “superior is UP / inferior is DOWN” form the UP-DOWN schema.

Lao extends its meanings when it is put before or after particular words as prefixes or suffixes. In the Chinese context, we use “Lao-X” and “X-Lao” structures to show someone’s implied social status. It is worth noting that these linguistic structures do not always indicate hierarchies but a sense of respect and reverence. Following examples are in the case like “*the elderly*”, “*buddy*” and so on.

Lao occurring in the first four examples above follow the “Lao-X” structure, while the last three follow the “X-Lao” structure. From these examples it can be found that the words that follow or are followed by Lao are often family names such as Sun, Zhang, Wang, and Li in the examples; yet there are also some fixed phrases such as the elderly, buddy, and so on. More examples can be seen in our daily conversations like “teacher”, and animal names like “rat”, “tiger”, and “eagle”. The mentioned expressions can be used in formal settings as well as in informal social conversations, whether in person or not. In terms of semantic coloring, the prefix Lao can express a variety of emotions, be it respect, affection, teasing, or mocking; while the suffix Lao always indicates a feeling of respect for the person. Lao, thus, acquires Sense 3 (an honorific for the elderly) and Sense 13 (used as a prefix), where the UP-DOWN schema reflects.

6. Significance

The Chinese character Lao has exerted profound significance in language and culture. Through specific teaching strategies and cultural understanding, the research of Lao in this essay not only helps students master this word, but also promote intercultural dialogues and respect.

Firstly, from the perspective of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teaching and Second Language Acquisition, Lao as a polysemous word is not only limited to describing aging, but also derives multiple meanings such as wisdom, experience and respect. This multilevel nature requires teachers to adopt a context-dependent teaching approach in vocabulary teaching. Educators can teach the usage of Lao through specific cultural backgrounds and actual contexts. For example, when describing family, society and traditional culture, emphasizing the positive and negative meanings of Lao in different contexts should be considered. This teaching method not only helps students understand the multiple meanings of vocabulary, but also enhances their cultural awareness. In addition, educators should encourage students to use different meanings of Lao in actual communication, and make them experience the vocabulary usage situation through role-playing and dialog practices, so as to enhance their communicative competence and cultural adaptability.

Furthermore, from the intercultural perspective, Lao is closely related to the metaphor of death, reflecting a deep understanding of the cycle of life. In Chinese language, Lao is not only about physical aging, but also pondering on the end of life. This metaphor conveys respect for life and philosophical thought in Chinese culture, emphasizes the dialectical relationship between life and death, and reflects the value of life and the acceptance of and reverence for the laws of nature. At the same time, the concept of “respect for the elderly” emphasized in traditional Chinese culture reflects respect and care for the elderly, which can promote intergenerational harmony and enhance social cohesion. With the spread of Chinese culture, the traditional concept of Lao has gradually been recognized by the world, especially in cultures where family and social responsibility are highly valued. Through cultural exchanges, international activities and educational programs, such as the promotional activities conducted in the Confucius Institute, this value can be introduced to other countries and cultural awareness and respect can be promoted.

7. Conclusion

In summary, this essay has presented an analysis of the Chinese character Lao from the cognitive semantic perspective. The author tries to explore the mechanism of meaning extension concerning Lao based on the foundation of cognitive linguistic theories, i.e. Prototype Theory, Metonymy, Metaphor, and Image Schema. Throughout the discussion, we have examined the historical evolution of Lao, its various senses, and the manner that Lao has acquired these senses. At last, certain significance that the research of polysemous word Lao has exerted has also been considered. The major findings that the research indicates are summarized as follows.

Firstly, the essay further strengthened the idea that different senses of Lao stem from the basic

meaning “old, aged, and elderly” (referring to Sense 1 in Section 4) in support of Prototype Theory. In the process of meaning acquiring, Radiation and Concatenation have provided two practicable ways, considerably extending its meanings from the original sense. Secondly, conceptual metonymy and conceptual metaphor support our understanding of the polysemous mechanism in a cognitive manner. Meanwhile, image schema promotes the construction of our perception and conceptualization. Thirdly, death metaphors embodied in Lao carry deep significance reflected in rich historical and social contexts, for example, the tradition of valuing the elderly and the philosophy of life. By exploring this character, the research fosters meaningful intercultural dialogue and mutual respect, encouraging learners to connect with diverse perspectives and traditions.

Due to the limited scope of this essay, certain aspects were not fully addressed. Additionally, personal limitations in academic research and the sample size of example phrases may have influenced the depth of analysis. Further researches are encouraged to consider aspects such as the evolution and formation of Sense 15 mentioned in this essay (Lao as a family name), the cultural allusion within the “Lao + Number” structure, and the appearances of some Internet buzzwords.

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